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Abstract

Yes, *The Acolyte*'s the one I like best ... I was working at Macquarie University at the time, and the corridors were ringing with the sound of symbols, and I wanted to write an anti-symbol novel. I always remember the time someone rushed down the corridor and said, 'Moby Dick is actually a giant penis.' I got tired of this extrapolation of symbols from novels and I thought, I'll write an anti-symbolic novel and I'll use as many symbols as I can, and send them up. That's why Vesper built a gigantic sling- it was really a giant phallus.¹

JOAN KIRKBY

'The Vertigris of Glory': The Lure of Abjection in Thea Astley's *The Acolyte*

Yes, *The Acolyte*'s the one I like best ... I was working at Macquarie University at the time, and the corridors were ringing with the sound of symbols, and I wanted to write an anti-symbol novel. I always remember the time someone rushed down the corridor and said, 'Moby Dick is actually a giant penis.' I got tired of this extrapolation of symbols from novels and I thought, I'll write an anti-symbolic novel and I'll use as many symbols as I can, and send them up. That's why Vesper built a gigantic sling – it was really a giant phallus.¹

The thing was that I grew up in an era where I was completely neutered by my upbringing ... when I was eighteen or nineteen I thought to myself that the only way one could have any sort of validity was to write as a male ... I don't even know how women in general think. I've been neutered by society so I write as a neuter.²

About a third of the way into the *The Acolyte*, the blind artist Holberg 'crushed every bone and severed the tendons' of his right hand, making Paul Vesper indispensable to him as amanuenses, gardener, grocery boy and wife comforter. Vesper says this about the decisive incident:

For the moment I couldn't see beyond the immediacy of the event. I've never been one of your symbol hunters. I'm hopeless at chess despite my play with mathematics. It's only since I've been absorbed by the arty parasites that nudge their tiny proboscises into the skin of Holberg's talent that I realize my deficiency in a whole world of experience. Doc, what's up with me? I simply don't see trees as dicks thrusting into the gaping uterus of the sky. I see them as trees. I need help. Here's a whole acre of people who live in a world of phalli ('Sockets and spigots!' says rough-hewn Slocombe. I love you Nev –), of gulping labiae, of fourth-form interpretations of cars, whales, telegraph poles and mammalian light-bulbs. Look, doc, there are only two possible continuous lines – straight and curved. Do I have to see them as genital substitutes? Do I? It makes eating an ice-cream cone difficult. You take my point, doc? My low-grained sensibilia apprehend cars, whales, telegraph poles and light-bulbs. I lick ice-cream, feller. I munch a flour-and-water wafer cone. I am not homosexual. I like girls in moderation. I don't want to bite off anyone's tool or switch on a breast or impregnate the Pacific. I am still the clean-cut fifteen-year-old now lumbered with twice that number of years who won two cups for running and I can't get into the team. I can't cry along with my pouched debilitated

mate suh-hex! suh-hex! I don't want to. doc, am I normal? I want tea-pots to be tea-pots and cups to be cups.³

Passages like this, together with references throughout the novel to those who write about art as 'the devious flies of art' (100), parasites on the ecology of culture (74) – 'their names are wrapped round the meat' (76) – must give pause to anyone who would wish to do more than examine the brilliant surface of Astley's prose. However, as *The Acolyte* is one of the most powerful critiques of the pattern of domination and subjugation which runs throughout Australian literature, it is important to risk the artist's ire in order to explore the source of the peculiar anger and aggression of the text. And since I am probably the person alluded to – the one who rushed down the corridor and said, '*Moby Dick* is actually a giant penis' – it is appropriate that I should risk this foolhardy enterprise. However I must point out that it was actually D.H. Lawrence who said that *Moby Dick* is 'the last phallic being of the white man', 'hunted by the maniacal fanaticism of our white mental consciousness'⁴ and that he took his cue from Melville himself who makes enough puns about the sperm and foreskin and erections of the whale to inspire even the resistant symbol hunter.

Without making too much of symbolism, I believe with Cassirer that the human animal is both 'animal rationale' and 'animal symbolicum': 'to know is to symbolize in one way or another.' As Charles Feidelson writes in his classic study of symbolism in American literature: 'To consider the literary work as a piece of language is to regard it as a symbol, autonomous in the sense that it is quite distinct both from the personality of its author and from any world of pure objects.'⁵

A poem delivers a version of the world; it is the world for the moment. And just as the language of a poem is a plastic symbolic medium in which subjective and objective elements are presented as an integral whole, so within the poem each word is potentially a standpoint, a symbolic crossroad, from which the whole poem may be viewed. (56)

Moreover, the exercise of the allogical language of poetry is necessarily anti-logical. Existing in the same medium, literature supersedes, manipulates, and recasts logical structure. Figures of speech fly in the face of logic; their structure is ordered on a different plan. They cast through the body of language a light that erases the lines drawn by logical discourse and creates new contours in the same stuff. (58)

That symbolism involves allogical structures of multiple meaning may have something to do with the resistance of Australian writers to the idea of symbolism. The refusal of any meaning or resonance that was not consciously intended is perhaps part of a resistance to the idea of the unconscious – as well as the non-conscious, that is 'the domain not subject to repression but not within the reach of consciousness either' – 'the whole system of myths and images that gives our view of society and of our

place in it a specific orientation'.⁶ However, twentieth century interest in symbolism has been 'part of the reaction against the nineteenth century's rationalism, positivism and scientism' and Mircea Eliade has argued that 'we have not even the right to restrict ourselves to what the authors thought about their own creations': 'Archaic symbolisms reappear spontaneously, even in the works of "realist" authors who know nothing about such symbols.'⁷

For all her resistance to the idea of symbolism Astley herself acknowledges that 'I can't resist using imagistic language'. She speaks of her own moments of epiphany: 'There's a sudden sort of formless knowledge. And you see those as distinct happenings. I suppose they're epiphanies, whatever that word means in the literary sense.'⁸ This sense of the evocation of one plane in terms of another sounds curiously like symbolism.⁹

What I would like to do in this paper is simply to examine some of the recurring images that occur in *The Acolyte*, in particular the imagery of pollution and defilement, in the context of contemporary theories of carnival, liminality, and abjection. *The Acolyte* is a key text in the Australian literary canon (*The Man Who Loved Children* is another) as an exemplar of the literature of abjection which Julia Kristeva has argued represents 'the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses'.¹⁰

But not until the advent of twentieth-century 'abject' literature (the sort that takes up where apocalypse and carnival left off) did one realize that the narrative web is a thin film constantly threatened with bursting. For, when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first ... the unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain him can no longer be *narrated* but *cries out* or is described with maximum stylistic intensity (language of violence, of obscenity, or of a rhetoric that relates the text to poetry). The narrative yields to a *crying-out theme* that when it tends to coincide with the incandescent states of a boundary-subjectivity that I have called abjection, is the crying-out theme of suffering-horror. In other words, the theme of suffering-horror is the ultimate evidence of such states of abjection within a narrative representation. If one wished to proceed farther still along the approaches to abjection, one would find neither narrative nor theme but a recasting of syntax and vocabulary – the violence of poetry, and silence. (141)

The literature of the abject exposes 'under the cunning orderly surface of civilizations, the nurturing horror that they attend to pushing aside by purifying, systematizing, thinking' (210). Kristeva's theories have a particular resonance in relation to Astley's novel, in its conceptualisation of the acolyte, the lush imagery of abjection and the language of violence in which it is articulated. Reading *The Acolyte* is similar to Julia Kristeva's description of reading Celine: 'A universe of borders, see-saws, fragile and mingled identities, wanderings of the subject and its object, fears and struggles, abjections and lyricisms. At the turning point between social

and asocial, familial and delinquent, feminine and masculine, fondness and murder' (135).

Abjection, writes Kristeva, is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' – 'what does not respect borders, positions rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (4). A concern with borders and their violation, with the unclear and undifferentiated permeates *The Acolyte*; indeed the acolyte is one for whom the borders between self and other have disintegrated. Astley's exploration of her 'rubbish tip saint' (104) and the 'mess', the 'garbage tip of relationships' (93), is set amidst 'the stink of summer' and the 'subtropical smudginess' of Queensland. *Grogbusters* itself is 'a border town' where trams jerk 'like cripples to predestined ends' (35). The town of Dingo is 'a hideous little outcrop of houses ... so ugly its demands for love eat out the observing heart':

The pub totters on the brink of every known disaster and smells permanently of beer and mangoes. We slumped our failure at a crippled table on the veranda in the moist dark and steadily drank our way through commiseration (false), friendship (temporary) and a distanced state where each of us observed two of the other with disgusted appraisal... Mangoes rotted. (35)

In addition to the imagery of rankness and rot, animals and acts which break down borders between human and animal, inside and outside, permeate the novel. There are numerous parasitic creatures who violate the border of the living subject they feed off, like 'the arty parasites who nudge their tiny proboscises into the skin of Holberg's talent' and 'the devious flies' on the meat of art referred to earlier. Vesper repeatedly refers to himself as a thrip, a small, destructive, usually winged insect that sucks the juices of plants. The blindness of Holberg – 'the great man crabbing his way along the fly-walk score of a negligible quartet' (3) – is a result of fly-strike, 'one eye entirely closed – no eyeball ... and the other permanently opened on a yellow clotted muscle with a faint smear of blue where the iris had once been' (7).

Crustaceans of various sorts – crabs, prawns, crayfish and lobsters – also permeate the text, both as meal and as analogy. 'Shrimped out, the lot of us, beside the pool' (75). Vesper rarely mentions Hilda without referring to 'the prawn sheen on Hilda's lip' (49); Ilse wins a lobster and 'There we are with this large crustacean in a bag on the floor beside us, listening to its pitiful assays to escape as it feels round and round the wet sacking. Slow, blind, unending, it fumbles and fumbles ...' (39) Holberg's thickening body is 'now swaddled in tropic carapace' (25) – the upper shell of a tortoise or crustacean.

'Have you ever seen crabs eating each other?' something made me ask. 'Alive. If one has the bad luck to fall on its back, the rest pounce in a flash. Nibble nibble. With the utmost delicacy, of course, getting their proteins live. On the claw, as it were. Let's eat each other. Everyone does.'

Their mouths all curved into disgusted crescents, then they ignored me. Rightly. We listen to it nightly on the news – political state smorgasbord, racial dinings, organized meat cubing called the glory of war, small private enterprise attacks on old ladies, petrolled and fired gentlemen in bush-sheds, children dawdlers on the way to school. They're all at it everywhere, and we ignore it and go on munching our own vegetarian servings while outside the carnivores pause for a minute and smack their lips. (41)

The imagery of sucking, swarming, crawling creatures inevitably evokes the abominations of Leviticus and its prohibition against certain 'creatures that cannot be unambiguously classified in terms of traditional criteria'.¹¹

Whatsoever hath no fins nor scales in the waters, that shall be an abomination to you ... neither shall ye defile yourselves with any manner of creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth ... To make a difference between the unclean and the clean ... (Leviticus, 11: 11, 43, 47)

Mary Douglas has argued that the concept of pollution is an attempt 'to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction': 'What is unclear and contradictory (from the perspective of social definition) tends to be regarded as unclean.' 'Holiness,' she writes, 'means keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order.'¹²

In the midst of this imagery of fecundity and abomination, Paul Vesper is presented as the epitome of the bourgeois subject defined in contradistinction to all that is gross and animal. He repeatedly affirms 'his appalling normalcy' (3) and 'the savagery of conformism' of his culture (63).

I want to assure you from the beginning, now that I am absorbed by my revolutionary climacteric, that I had all the properties of a suitably structured childhood. Fruit-juiced, three-mealed, educationally toyed, disciplined with all the footballer logic (tempered by a scatter-brained intellectualism in my mother) that a middle-class dad with a company car and conservative expense account could display. It was intensive gardening and my tiny shrub grew into the sort of sapling they felt they deserved, just a touch of thrips on the leaves at the right time, a non-dangerous performance at examinations and two cups for running. (2)

He takes 'an undistinguished degree' in one of 'the secure faculties like engineering' (9). An obsession with order characterises all his activities, 'everything clean, every product of my horrible clockwork mind' (18). He practices musical composition with 'a mathematical sweetness like knitting for old ladies' (13) and possesses just 'the sensitivity to regret the need to use other people' (4).

Vesper is the acolyte of the title of the novel, who has surrendered his own autonomy and selfhood ostensibly out of his love for the blind artist Holberg but as much to resist the fierce struggle for autonomy that besets us all: 'I am a natural assistant' (19). He shares his girlfriend Freckles as he later shares Hilda: 'We were just one big happy incestuous family.' He

seems a paradigm of the negative selfhood articulated by Graeme Turner in *National Fictions*:

The version of the individual which emerges has the Australian protagonist responding to a secularised and alienated environment by admitting the withdrawal of meaning and value, but without inventing a replacement for which he may accept responsibility. Behind this metaphysic there is an ideological proposition that negates the value of individual action and legitimates powerlessness and subjection.¹³

Vesper says of himself:

I was like a dog in many of my responses. Beg! I begged. Sit! There I was slaving and grinning with my front paws paddling. Heel! I wheeled back to the sniff-rear of ankle in a second. Play dead! Down on my back in a flash, eyes checking, rolling in their whites, to gather the response. (23)

Relentlessly he chronicles his servitude: 'I am the gauche butler when the curtain rises, the dusting maid, the harem eunuch' (31); 'I'm a born limpet' (47); 'I feel like a parasite. And the more I feed the emptier I become' (150). He is 'Holberg's eunuch' (86), a baronial retainer (94), 'the more than general factotum' managing his master's affairs' (97), 'a grocer's gardener's stud boy' (109), 'the dumb servitor', 'the harem pander', 'the dusting maid' (115). 'I have a pregnant bank-book, no talent, a tin tray, a Burne-Jones print, no talent, two glowing letters of reference from the old firm, an unused clarinet, no talent and a dinner suit' (121).

Content to sit in the shadow of another, whether Slocombe or Holberg, he muses:

...I am Holberg's other self, his seeing self, and while I store up, programming my giant Cyclops eye like a slave computer, he expends all his heart-pulse on interpretation. It could explain my bondage, which has all the transparency of cellophane but is a thousand times tougher ... May I crampon up the rocks of your indifference? I may? Pitch camp on the shallow ledges of your eyes and sit out the blizzard? ... I am filled also with self-loathing. (39)

Holberg is my cross and I'm nailed to him and you wonder why it is I don't wriggle off and walk away? The rips in the soft pads of my pander hands, perhaps. The rags of feet. *I'm the mini-Jesus!* (70)

I am the schoolboy fag for the hero of the sixth, God love us, and I will do anything at all, anything, lick your boots, replay and replay your phrases, cart your beer, accommodate your wife give me half the chance. The lot. (82)

Mawkish Vesper! Mystically I have outdistanced myself and across the uneasy landscape of my nullified dreams, plans, ambitions, spot this tiny figure that is me stumbling between the cratered dunghills of my achievements ... Mother, father, you would not be proud of me. There is nothing my tepid personality has contributed ... A shapeless aggregate of forty-odd years who has rendered only a menial apostleship ... my choir-boy seed sprouting my own choirboy face. (111)

In Kristeva's terms, Vesper is a stray; a subject who 'presents himself with his own body and ego as the most precious non-objects; they are no longer seen in their own right, but forfeited abject': 'Such are the pangs and delights of masochism' (5). He is one for whom the other – the negative selfhood articulated by his society – has become alter ego; he leads a forfeited existence. Though he is able to establish a defensive position he lacks a secure differentiation between subject and object (7). He is not at all unaware of his abjection and not without laughter – since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection (8). The experience of abjection is specifically related by Kristeva to *'Too much strictness on the part of the other, confused with the One and the Law'*: 'I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place of what will be me – a being there of the symbolic that a father might embody' (10). There is much evidence in the novel, as the above passages suggest, that Vesper's individuality and selfhood have been forfeited to the savage conformism of his suitably structured society. Like the young Hal Porter he feels impelled to be 'the practised participant in other people's lives'. He is 'the solid citizen arriving at the job on time, reading my books, wiping down the draining-board, pruning the mandevilla, camouflaged with stratagems that can only reaffirm my essential dullness' (37). 'Your trouble,' Hilda suggested, 'is the fact that you're so old. I mean you're not young' (15). Hence as he says to his parents on his 'betrothal of sorts': 'I love you with every oedipal pore of my entire body. Having been moulded into what I am, a colourless mechanic. I feel the least I can do is make you two happy. I feel that's all I'm expected to do. I don't come into it' (16).

The musician Holberg is the antithesis of Vesper; in both life and art he transgresses the boundaries of order and taste – his 'racy diminished sevenths ... ram, bomb-crude, into a knees-together prissiness of formal composition' (38). He and his musicians 'indulge in the horsing about of rape-packs – the uh one uh two uh three uh four' (51). He explores 'the entrails of every possible harmonic combination' (65). Set apart by his blindness and his genius, and allowed a license not extended to other members of the culture, Holberg with his 'meaty face' and fly-struck eyes and his sexual cannibalism, represent all that is excluded by yet fascinates the dominant culture:

They enjoyed guiding his uncertain feet around homestead verandas until it bored them or watching him eat with his fingers more difficult chops, repulsed and fascinated, and tolerated his drunken jazz assaults on their untuned pianos because his affliction was so outrageous and so total. (4)

People are drawn to his outrage, his brutal selfishness, 'his complete involvement in his own darkness, as if he loved the cage with the cover' (12). 'His life wound was smiting us, I see now, I see now, but we thumped our feet and walloped our hands into painful redness' (26). Women are attracted to his vulnerability (125). "He's like a primitive god,

groans sordid Ilse, head down, among the egg-shells and the toast crusts. He wants everything he's touched ... He's taken the lot and ruined the lot and all we've done is sit around and wait to be ruined.'" (129) 'He is the centre of chaos. All round us are dancers, screamers. I sense tribal copulation but he is blind and unaware, rising as the players slam into the terminus' (133).

Amidst 'gullies clotted with subtropical rain-forest', Holberg builds his house, 'a massive set of linked glass boxes set along the plateau rim in a shaggy garden where Holberg has had placed in surprising secretnesses classically naked statues of half a dozen women whose plaster hands 'modestly shield their pudenda' and with whom Vesper finds him copulating animal fashion (67, 25). There he holds his court to his 'hideous Greek chorus of yes-men who can't do a thing ourselves' (71): 'And I look across the drink swirling room at Hilda and see us both as ancients, servitors sucked dry of youth while Holberg, self-regenerating with every bar he writes, grows fat with procreation' (71).

There Holberg humiliates his guests, the 'jackals' of culture. And in his rage he transgresses the limits of their pretensions and prohibitions. This is his attraction and his power. Holberg rages against the would-be playwright Shumway, 'What stinks is your dishonesty.'

(Holberg, there's gravy dribbling down your coat, you are facing the wrong way, your elbow is on Bonnie Coover's bread roll, but there is a magnificence about you.) 'If you want total theatre, matey, then I'm with you. But I want urination and defecation and vomiting and nose-blowing. The lot.' People stopped poking at their doubtful brown servings. 'I want diarrhoea and spewing and mucus and none of your bloody plastic turds, matey. If that actor can't turn on a good crap at ten past nine every night in Act Two then I want him drummed out of Equity. I want stench and fartings and blokes blowing their noses between their fingers and spitting great gobbets into the orchestra pit and then I'll be with you. Then I'll subscribe. Then I'll deliver you some incidental music that you'll be incapable of assessing anyway. But I'll respect your motives. You funny man! You seem to think the cerebellum is located in the scrotum.' ... We should have lost a lot of friends that way. These things work in reverse for sucking fish, however, and Holberg's social monstrousness brought out the masochist flagellant in all of them. (82-83)

As this passage suggests, Holberg offers a world of carnival, of profanation and excess – all that is relegated to the margins of Vesper and his culture's 'appalling normalcy'. All the major motifs of carnival are exhibited – the transgression of boundaries, the opening of orifices usually closed in the interest of social order, the comic privileging of the lower half of the body – in Bakhtin's words, 'Eating, drinking, defecating and other elimination (sweating, blowing the nose, sneezing).'¹⁴ Carnival provides a space for 'symbolic inversion', 'any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political'.¹⁵

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe the way that carnival 'attacks the authority of the ego (by rituals of degradation and by the use of masks and costume)'; it 'denies with a laugh the hierarchical arrangements of the symbolic at the same moment as it re-opens the body-boundary, the closed orifices of which normally guarantee the repressive mechanism itself'.¹⁶ It provides 'a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order' (7). They go on to argue that 'the bourgeois subject defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as "low" – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating' (191). However, precisely because 'the grotesque physical body' is suppressed and distanced as the very sign of rationality and bourgeois subjectivity, it exists as 'what Macherry calls "a determining absent presence"' (105). It is this 'determining absent presence' which shapes Vesper's world and explains the dynamics of his attraction to Holberg. Disgust turns to desire; what has been violently excluded emits an irresistible fascination. Holberg's fascination is the fascination of abjection itself; he represents, in Kristeva's terms, 'a conjunction of waste and object of desire, of corpse and life, fecality and pleasure, murderous aggressivity and the most neutralizing power'. Holberg is 'the impaired master': 'And I who identify with him, who desire to share with him a brotherly, mortal embrace in which I lose my own limits, I find myself reduced to the same abjection, a fecalised, feminized, passivated rot.'¹⁷

Astley's acolytes long for the ritual debasement of carnival – all that has been culturally excluded from their lives. As Vesper says, 'Do I have to confess bless me father to a sneaking liking for the verdigris of glory that rubs off on me? (I am all greenish stain!) ... I'm the natural tick parasite necessary for preserving the ecology of culture' (74). At the performance of Holberg's 'Gold Coast Sinfonia', the acolytes find themselves 'sitting on the edge of some deformed revelation'; they find themselves exposed without transfiguration in Holberg's composition: 'The ruined people. After those lyrics, how can I (or he) achieve redemption? Is it only to scrape up a little of Holberg's exuded genius, like slime, I tell myself now? Like slime?' (106).

This 'edge' is what Victor Turner describes as 'liminality', a liminal phase being one where novices are 'temporarily undefined', beyond the normative social structures and obligations. They experience 'a close connection with the non-social or asocial powers of life and death'.¹⁸ There is in these liminal moments the potential for liberation; these moments may become the space in which hybridization occurs, providing new combinations that might shift the terms of the system (14, 58). Certainly the excesses of Holberg and his entourage suggest a desire for the dissolution of the inadequately constituted bourgeois subject in Australian society, a desire to dissolve rigid categorical structures that stifle and destroy even as they sustain and protect.

However, whereas liminal situations may provide a space in which new models, symbols and paradigms might arise, they may function simply as an inversion, a temporary release that makes ordinary confinement more bearable. Turner emphasises that liminal phases invert but do not necessarily subvert the status quo. The reversal may simply underline to the community that chaos is the alternative to cosmos (40-41). Moreover, as Stallybrass and White point out, carnival often abuses and demonizes the weaker not the stronger social groups in a process of displaced abjection whereby a low social group turns against a lower (19). Certainly in Holberg's carnivalesque world, abjection is displaced on to woman. In that respect Holberg's carnival turns out to be an intensification rather than an inversion of the dynamics of the outside world.

Within the world of *The Acolyte*, it is 'woman' who carries the force of the images of abjection and readers often remark the 'feminine' qualities of Vesper. The narrative abuse is relentless. Holberg tells his wife: 'Nothing satisfies your sex but the inside turned out, the glistening bowels of me and the small white pip of a soul. And then you'd want to carve your name on the pip, even, no matter how tiny' (94). Like Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, Astley in this novel, and the genuinely horrifying short story 'Ladies Need Only Apply', is working with some of the more grotesque cultural stereotypes of women and this is one of the most discomfiting aspects of her work. However, both writers expose the vicious inadequacy of these images. Grogbuster socialites are 'the sort of women who collected amusing oddities to stave off boredom - shrunken heads, the preserved genitals of native hillsmen, shark-tooth cigarette holders ... oh, anything that might provide pseudo-artistic talking-point at Grogbusters folk evenings' (4). There are the women who pander to Holberg, 'thick bosoms and chests desperate to claim suckledom' (27).

They would swoop on him like social rocs carting him off to mongrel gatherings of the rich and influential; race across home-coming tarmacs to greet him with casseroles ... drive all the dedicated miles to Plateautop to air the shrine when the idol was absent for a stretch, performing menial domesticities with the joyous dedication of Carthusians ... Bonnie Coover was one of these. She was a spectacularly plain woman, wrestler-shaped, whose skin had been varnished by too much sun and too much liquor. A place-dropper of distinction with a passion for head-waiters, she also dropped names. These stale dung-pads littered her conversation. (69)

There is 'Slum Chum' Freckles whom Vesper shares with his boss Slocombe:

'You look' - struggling with her basic English vocabulary for a word - 'fagged', she brought out with a mighty semantic effort ... She had North Queensland peasant legs and my present revulsion was largely sympathy, I swear ... She sat there with the stoicism of her legs, drinking tea with me and trying not to listen. (21)

Freckles, who 'pregnant at last', is 'found strangled in her cheeky red car beached in a tangled bay of sunless tea-tree in the hills outside town' (53). There is Bathgate's friend who 'hanged herself on the rotary clothes-hoist among eight of her husband's drip dry shirts' (48), Bathgate's dying wife Emmie – a chrysalis-frail woman whose limbs are gradually turning to chalk: 'Smudged words were padding the air – Emmie's disease had affected her speech ("She can only nag me in glottal stops now," ... and there he was sponging her down with the gentleness of a martyr...' (59). There is Holberg's indomitable 'sickly yellow', 'macaw eyed' Aunt Sadie, 'a grotesque baby in a cow-girl outfit and a stetson' (64), 'a tiny glutton who drools through the hours between meals' (96). Holberg fondly strokes her 'near-bald unwigleted head' (106).

There are 'the goose-girls', Ilse all 'fragility of bone and diffident flesh' (7), 'the mothering bitch' with 'her food-wrecking paws' (44), and her younger sister Hilda, 'a cream cheese Teuton' (24) with a mouth 'the colour of prawn' (31). Hilda's wifely abjection to Holberg surpasses even Vesper's: 'Hapless Hilda. She suddenly looked incredibly weary, her features smudged in across her face as though Holberg were gradually painting her out' (56). As Holberg succumbs to the groupies who flock to his bed – 'the raped child', a librettist, 'a contralto', a cellist, 'a mournful swamp creature' – 'poor cream cheese' in paroxysms of abjection feigns blindness, crashing through kitchen and garden, serving sugared steak and salted puddings for 'sacrificial periods' each day (98). Holberg beats her for her 'gutless snivelling', punching her 'again and again on the side of her pliant face, while her torn leg bled redly into the bracken' (117). Vesper 'comforts' her: 'in the shelter of some rocks where we once scraped our climbing shins I worry her frantic flesh into a temporary forgetfulness' (100).

Ilse, devastated when Holberg marries Hilda, had 'played a mini-Greek tragedy of devoted sister ministering, ministering'.

Her kitchen was choking on the stench of burned vegetable. A blackened pot was askew in the sink. And now eyelids like swollen pink prawn bulging over grievance ... insect din quivered its ragged patterns. Oh, this slatternly cave of her being, a slum of stained hopsack and smoke-filled curtain-weave and wine-blessed carpet across which several cushions had crept in a piteous attempt to escape. Inside her weeping house-coat she had shrunk to nothing and the corn tassels of her hair simply hung.

'He's taking legal action to get Jamie.'

I sipped Ilse's version of tea. My days were brown enough. This is woman's magazine stuff with a stinking vengeance. (129)

Ultimately, at the pop concert of the 'hoodlum cult where every singer projects like a pack-rapist', amid 'hyena howls flying drink cans and the girl abandoning the last scrupulous preserves of self' – Ilse is raped:

Ilse has been discovered, bedraggled nereid, in the mud body-hollowed parking lot alongside the creek. The five louts had screamed back into the mob. It could have been anyone at all. It was Jamie who had found her ... just as they were finishing with her ... Her face was gummed with grass and leaves that acted as a benign plaster to the already swelling and lop-sided cheek-bone, the purplish darkening tegument around the eyes. One arm had been bent viciously back under her and when Hilda drew it gently out the wrist hung grotesque and useless. (134)

However, Ilse is to be further abjected: 'But oh my god, what will have happened to him' (136) is Holberg's response; 'Jamie, I thought, I wish you hadn't seen what you did' (144) is Vesper's. Jamie himself wants nothing more to do with his mother. When she is released from hospital she comes to live at Holberg's mansion, 'a shadow goose-girl pecking gently round the edges of our pond' (47).

'You? Well, you are the genuine masochist goose-girl, aren't you, eh? Your wounds bleed profusely and you display them with pride. The Holberg stigmata, that's what you've got. Maybe you are a genuine saint. What you're really trying to tell me is that I don't love my dunghill, isn't that it? I don't love the crap and the stink?' (150)

There are various 'readings' that might be given to this abjection of woman in the text; an older style feminism might argue that the author has internalised the woman-hatred of the dominant social order. Astley gives weight to this reading in her remark: 'I grew up in an era where I was completely neutered by my upbringing ... when I was eighteen or nineteen I thought to myself that the only way one could have any sort of validity was to write as a male ... I don't even know how women in general think. I've been neutered by society so I write as a neuter.'¹⁹ A somewhat later feminist reading, on the model of Kaja Silverman's reading of 'the masochistic excess' of King Vidor's *Gilda*, might argue that Astley pushes the social definition of woman as abject to breaking point, thereby exposing the inadequacy of subject positions available to woman in the social order. Silverman, for instance, argues that *Gilda*'s ritual self-humiliation highlights 'the degree to which her masochism is culturally inherited and written and represents a point of female resistance within the very system which defines woman as powerless and lacking'; it can be understood as 'the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to facilitate (i.e. create the desire for) new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack'.²⁰ Or one might use Kristeva's articulation of abjection as having to do with feminine POWER and see the language of the novel as subversive in disrupting the border of the social order – literally exposing its limitations as well as embodying the potential force that might transfigure it.

Kristeva's particular contribution to theories of pollution and defilement is her insight that the loathing of defilement is a protection against what

is seen as 'the poorly controlled power of mothers' (77). Indeed Kristeva argues that 'The power of pollution thus transposes on the symbolic level the permanent conflict resulting from an unsettled separation between masculine and feminine power at the level of social institutions. Non-separation would threaten the whole society with disintegration' (78). Abjection, the weight of meaninglessness 'on the edge of monexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me', is first experienced when the child attempts to establish autonomy by separating itself from the mother.

The object confronts us ... with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (13)

Abjection is related to the logic of separation, the attempt of a subject who is not yet a subject to separate itself from the mother whom it is not yet able to see as an object. Because the mother effects the original mapping of the body into clean and unclean, she is associated with excrement and its equivalents – decay, infection, disease, blood, in short with defilement and pollution. Paternal law – the order of language and culture – represses maternal authority and the corporeal mapping of the body (72). Kristeva argues that just as there is on the part of the subject a fear of her/his own identity sinking into the mother, the symbolic order has a violent need to subordinate the maternal: 'the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational wily, uncontrollable power' (70). There is a fear of 'a phantasmatic mother who also constitutes, in the specific history of each person, the abyss that must be established as an autonomous (and not encroaching) place and distinct object, meaning a signifiable one, so that such a person might learn to speak' (100). Abjection, signified by corporeal waste – menstrual blood, excrement, nail parings, decay – evokes the pre-symbolic maternal fusion and suggests the frailty of the symbolic order in its attempts to repress the mother (70).

However, Kristeva maintains that within the symbolic order there remains a trace of the maternal in a space that she calls the semiotic which exists simultaneously. The semiotic, in Kristeva's version of Lacan's imaginary, is the pre-oedipal space of polymorphous drives, rhythms, impulses, – body energy before arranged by the constraints placed on the body by family and social structures. It is a kinetic rhythm that precedes and underlies figuration.²¹ It precedes the symbolic order and has the potential to undermine and threaten it. It is 'a maternal space, the space where the child's body and the mother's body occupy a mutual space ... a threshold' where first vocalisation and later naming and language can take a hold. Kristeva contends, as Toril Moi points out, that 'any

strengthening of the semiotic, which knows no sexual difference, must therefore lead to a weakening of traditional gender division'.²² Kristeva's theory of the semiotic, as Jacqueline Rose has written, is an attempt 'to confront language at the point where it undoes itself' and the attraction of the theory is that it suggests 'aspects of language which escape the strait-jacket of social norms'.²³

In artistic practice, the irruption of the semiotic within a text – signalled by maximum stylistic intensity, energy, violence, a rhetoric that relates the text to poetry – represents an overthrow of the social order, an undoing of the violence previously done to the body in the acquisition of language and culture. As Kristeva writes,

semiotic violence breaks through the symbolic border and tends to dissolve the logical order which, in short the outer limit founding the human and the social ... the subject crosses the border of the symbolic and reaches the semiotic chora, which is on the other side of the social frontier. The re-enacting of the signifying path taken from the symbolic unfolds the symbolic itself and ... opens it up to the motility where all meaning is erased. (79)

In this context Astley's idiosyncratic style has particular relevance. Adrian Mitchell has argued of Astley's 'arch mannerisms' and 'Gothic splendours' that 'the substance of her fiction tends to be diminished by the playful intelligence of the narration and more critically that the liveliness is separate from the imaginative centre of the narrative'.²⁴ However, Kristeva provides a framework in which the opposite could be said to be true. In this novel of abjection, in which abjection is so violently displaced on to woman, the style powerfully evokes the suppressed pre-Oedipal maternal rhythms. The novel is characterised by the disruptive aspects of language which Kristeva identifies with 'the discourse of the mother' – 'something that evades the repressive aspects of signification in language, something that's on the edge, on the border, beyond signification'.²⁵ There is in Astley's style, to borrow Kristeva's words again, 'a deluge of the signifier which so inundates the symbolic order that it portends the latter's dissolution in a dancing, singing and poetic animality' (79). In cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing its vocabulary and syntax, the word itself, and releasing from beneath them the drives, poetic language confronts order at its most fundamental level, the logic of language and the principle of the state (80). In Kristeva's terms, Astley's novel is highly ethical in that it 'pluralizes, pulverizes, musicates' and disrupts the symbolic order (233).

Kristeva's theory provides a model for reading the excess of abjection in Astley's text as a representation of what Josephine Feral calls 'the spasmodic force of woman':

Having remained close to the maternal body in spite of the repression which society forces upon her, she inscribes herself naturally within the semiotic and occupies a

privileged position within it ... This is an a-symbolic force which allows the subject to renew the bonds with what is repressed within her, with the repressed that is always the mother, in order to make it reappear in the form of insolence ... Taken to the extreme, the spasmodic force can lead to the subject's disintegration and death, and at the same time, to a total rupture of the state's order, to the subversion of the laws, to the incoherence of all discourse, to the foreclosure of communication. (27)

The excess of abjection and the baroque style in *The Acolyte* are the mark of anger and resistance to the dominant paradigms of the text, a dynamic made explicit in the last chapter of the book when Vesper turns the 'steel member' of Taurus, Astley's explicit phallic symbol, against the demonized Holberg:

What is there left for a servant of the lord who has discovered that the idol's hands never move towards the slowly spoiling offerings unless it be to stroke its own stone thighs ... The swaying, chanting throngs bearing the garlanded monstrosity through summer streets will be crushed by their own abasement and still nothing will shower down upon them.

Get up off your bloody plinth! I shriek right through the bored-out channels of my empty self...

What bound us together was our religion, our unstinted worship of the love-object who was indeed one of ourselves. God and man. (147-149)

I want to break into obscene cries about his half-baked genius, his gluttony for worship, my pity for him, my latest understanding, my own dismemberment. (154)

However, this chapter is also redolent with maternal imagery. Vesper longs for his lost Paradise, Huahine – 'my days there will be so fluid there will be reversals of earth and water' (144) – and putting into his mouth the resin of a blue gum 'that held memories of the wife' he thinks of 'the nature-rape child years': 'knowing, carnally this roly-poly slope, wallowing in it, down it, learning its curves by heart ... squatting on it, balancing, feeling the salt-scars; conning trees, branch by branch, climbing, hanging ... I chewed ...' (152). Though he still longs to 'lie stretched full length in the chaotic undergrowth and weep for the lot of us' (154) he finds he can no longer swallow the communion bread which 'rises in my gorge': 'I chew it again with my blunted irreverent teeth, but it refuses to be swallowed ... And I am cut in half' (154). In psychoanalytic terms the child's refusal to ingest food marks the beginning of separation; in the expulsion of food s/he discloses a space between self and other. Subsequently Vesper shatters the glass walls of his imprisonment, blood 'pours its protest without staunch', another Kristevan emblem of the breaking down of the separations on which the social order is based, and 'Outside rain releases a haemorrhage of water and whole landscapes are wiped out in an instant ... I cannot speak but their voices go on and

become wordless'. The motifs of blood and rain, the dissolution of walls and boundaries, the intermingling of that which is usually separate, the dissolution of speech into wordlessness, all suggest a return to the energies of the undifferentiated semiotic which underlies the symbolic order. Although David Tacey has recently argued a negative reading for the dissolution in Patrick White's fiction,²⁷ in the rigidly authoritarian society Astley portrays in *The Acolyte* – one with alarming similarities to the prison state outlined by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* and indeed Graeme Turner argues for the appropriateness of this model to Australia – dissolution may be heralded as a positive force. It is the mark of resistance to social structures experienced as oppressive and insufficient. It suggests a longing for oppressive forms to be dissolved and returned to a fluid state, thus liberating the elements to be recombined into new patterns. Astley's great power as a novelist is her ability to identify these so-called private terrors as cultural terrors. The acolyte does not represent a private dilemma; in Astley's cultural analysis, the acolyte is a manifestation of a particular cultural terror of a troubled social group. To cite Turner again, 'the Australian myth accommodates us to the inevitability of subjection': 'Granted that meaning is socially constructed, then the function of the thematic model which I have outlined clearly is to naturalise a position that undermines the individual's prospects of playing any active, individualised role within society' (76).

NOTES

1. Thea Astley, in *Rooms of Their Own*, interviewed by Jennifer Ellison (Melbourne: Penguin, 1986), p. 54.
2. Thea Astley, in *Yacker: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work*, interviewed by Candida Baker (Sydney and London: Picador, 1986), pp. 42-43.
3. Thea Astley, *The Acolyte* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972), pp. 63-64. All further references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
4. D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Mercury, 1965), p. 152.
5. Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 55.
6. Leon Roudiez, 'Introduction' to *Revolution in Poetic Language* by Julia Kristeva (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 8.
7. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (London: Harvill Press, 1961), pp. 9, 25.
8. Thea Astley, *Yacker*, op.cit., pp. 47, 53.
9. Kathleen Raine, 'On the Symbol', *Defending Ancient Springs* (Ipswich, Suffolk: Golgonooza Press, 1985), p. 108.
10. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 208. Subsequent page numbers will be incorporated into the text.
11. Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 98.

12. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Ark, 1984), p. 53.
13. Graeme Turner, *National Fictions* (Sydney, London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), pp. 9-10.
14. M. Bakhtin cited in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 65.
15. Barbara Babcock, *The Reversible world: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, edited by Barbara Babcock (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 14.
16. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, op.cit., pp. 183-184.
17. Julia Kristeva, op.cit., p. 185.
18. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), pp. 27-28.
19. Thea Astley, Yacker, op.cit., pp. 42-43.
20. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 231.
21. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, op.cit., pp. 25-27.
22. Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 165.
23. Mary Jacobus, 'Interview with Beate Josephi' in *Australian Feminist Studies*, No. 2 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 47, 49.
24. Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 143, 151.
25. Adrian Mitchell, 'Fiction', *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, edited by Leonie Kramer (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 166.
26. Josette Feral, 'Antigone or the Irony of the Tribe', *Diacritics*, Vol. 8 (September 1978), p. 10-11.
27. David Tacey, *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988).